

Practical Training in Evaluation: How Students Learn by Doing

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Emily Subialka Nowariak

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Charles, for all of his support. I am really glad that we decided to pursue the graduate school journey together. This thesis is also dedicated to my parents, Cathi and Timothy, for always believing in me and encouraging me to pursue my goals.

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of ten students who engaged in experiential learning of evaluation. A grounded theory approach was used to understand what and how students learn about evaluation through these opportunities. This study is important because there is strong support for practical experiences in teaching evaluation and documented success of the strategy in other fields, yet little empirical research on experiential learning specific to evaluation exists (Trevisan, 2004). Findings suggest that students develop technical skills, soft skills, and learn about evaluation context via practical experiences. In addition, practical experiences help students gain confidence and refine their ideas about who they are as evaluators. Peer learning provides an important source of support for students, and mentorship is also important, although a tricky balance exists between providing enough support and providing sufficient room for autonomy.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
List of Tables.....	viii
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
The Problem: Training Evaluators for our Practitioner-based Field	1
Lack of Research on Practical Experiences in Evaluation.....	3
One Example: The Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute	4
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Overview of the Thesis	5
Chapter 2. Review of the Literature	6
Calls for Practical Experiences in the Teaching of Evaluation.....	6
Pulling from Adult Education and Related Relevant Literature	9
Types of Practical Experiences and Argument for the Practicum Model.....	11
Lack of Research on Teaching Evaluation	16
Existing Literature on Practicums in Evaluation.....	17
Discussion of the Literature	25
Chapter 3. The Intervention	27
How the Practical Experience Process Works	28
Amount of Engagement to Date	29
Structure of MESI.....	30
Research and Evaluation of MESI.....	31
Chapter 4. Methods	33
Design of the Study	33
Sampling	34
Recruitment	36
Data Collection Instruments.....	37
Data Collection Procedures.....	38
Analysis.....	39

Chapter 5. Results.....	42
Research Question 1: What did students learn?	42
Theme 1: Gaining Knowledge and Skills	44
Theme 2: It Is Not Just About Knowledge	46
Theme 3: There Are Other Influencers	49
Research Question 2: How did students learn?	49
Theme 4: Peer Learning Is Comforting and Helpful	49
Theme 5: Mentor Support Is Important, but Tricky	52
Theme 6: Internal Ways of Learning	54
Theme 7: Coursework as Complementary.....	57
Pulling It All Together in a Model	57
Chapter 6. Discussion	61
Summary of Findings.....	61
Limitations	64
Implications for Practice	66
Implications for Research	68
Conclusion.....	70
References	72
Appendix A: Recruitment Emails	76
Appendix B: Questionnaire.....	78
Appendix C: Interview Questions	80
Appendix D: Consent Form	83
Appendix E: List of Things Respondents Reported Learning	85
Appendix F: Quotations - Relationship Between Coursework and Practical Experiences	89

List of Figures

Figure 1. Visual Model of How Students Learn Evaluation Via Practical Experiences ..58

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Existing Literature on Evaluation Practicum Programs.....	25
Table 2. Sampling of Recent MESI Projects.....	30
Table 3. Summary of Research Question #1 – What did students learn?.....	43

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Problem: Training Evaluators for our Practitioner-based Field

Evaluators are made, not born, and an extended period of training is necessary to master the evaluation-specific skills and knowledge necessary to provide quality service to clients, as well as to be socialized into the professional frameworks, standards and ethical guidelines. (Lavelle & Donaldson, 2010, p. 10)

Those two evaluators conducted a study in 2008 in which they identified 48 programs in the United States that offered a graduate level degree with at least two classes including the term “evaluation” in the title. A total of 35 of the programs had a title that specifically called attention to an evaluation specialization. Lavelle and Donaldson concluded that the study showed that “[u]niversity programs do not appear to be on the decline and appear to be training evaluators for the growing demands of evaluation practice” (p. 20). Further, in a study of the competencies held by newly graduated evaluators as well as the competencies sought by prospective employers, Dewey, Montrosse, Schröter, Sullins, and Mattox (2008) found that “[s]urvey and job back analyses clearly indicate that many of the competencies taught in graduate programs are sought by employers” (p. 280). Common competencies that were both taught and sought included quantitative analyses, database management, and report writing.

However, Dewey et al. (2008) also found discrepancies between what was sought by employers and the competencies held by recent graduates. In particular, they found five major gaps: interpersonal skills, writing, project and team management, research

design, and evaluation theory. Dewey et al. (2008) conclude that these gaps in competencies reflect a disconnect between the conceptual aspects of evaluation that are taught in the classroom and the practical aspects of work in the field. They further explain,

Students may practice interpersonal skills in graduate school but mainly with like-minded individuals from their respective programs. Graduate students write numerous papers, but these are usually written for their professors, not for evaluation stakeholder audiences. Students may have coursework that includes project and team management but in a structured and guided setting rather than in an applied setting with real stakeholders and real budget and resource constraints. Most students take classes in research design, but these designs may not be feasible in real-world settings. Likewise, students of evaluation may be taught evaluation theory, but they have little opportunity to translate these theories into practice. (Dewey et al., 2008, p. 283)

Dewey et al. (2008) say that providing graduate students practical experiences in evaluation could help to overcome these gaps.

Lavelle and Donaldson (2010) found that many of the evaluation programs being offered in 2008 did require a practicum, internship, or field placement of some sort. Practical experiences of this nature are commonly called for in evaluation training as a way for students to gain real world experience in things such as the political nature of evaluation, project management, and client engagement, which may not be able to be fully taught or grasped in a classroom setting. Researchers also discuss how the

classroom is best for acquiring knowledge, while practical experiences provide an opportunity for students to hone their skills in things like data analysis or report writing (Chelimsky, 1997; Cronbach et al., 1980; Davis, 1986; Nadler & Cundiff, 2009; Trevisan, 2002; see Chapter Two for further discussion). Therefore, practical experiences in evaluation, if implemented well, may provide an important avenue for ensuring that the field produces high quality evaluators who meet the needs of existing employers, thus contributing to the longevity and legitimacy of the field.

Lack of Research on Practical Experiences in Evaluation

While there is strong support for practical experiences in the teaching of evaluation, as well as documented success of the strategy in other fields (Fitzpatrick, 1994), Trevisan, via an extensive literature review in 2004, found only five articles describing practicum experiences. He describes practicum experiences as the most intensive type of practical experience where “students work directly with clients and may see a project from start to finish or focus on one or more aspects of an evaluation” (p. 261).

Trevisan noted that all of the articles in his review reported positive student outcomes and experiences, but acknowledged that the articles consisted primarily of program descriptions from faculty supervisors, with none being formal research studies. Further, only two of the five articles on practicum experiences presented evaluation data on student experiences and outcomes. Where evaluation data were available, Trevisan notes that, “Beyond satisfaction, however, there are no consistent outcome variables represented in the literature. In sum, supervisors and students are in need of structure to

guide their roles and relationship” (p. 268). Additionally, Trevisan noted that the results of his literature review did not provide an answer to the question of how to structure practical training programs.

One Example: The Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute

The Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI) is one example of an entity that provides practical evaluation experiences to evaluation students. MESI is an interdisciplinary evaluation training institute at the University of Minnesota that places graduate students in real-world evaluations. MESI provides ongoing supervision and support to students as they engage in the evaluation experience. (More information about MESI is available in Chapter Three.)

Purpose of the Study

This limited information from the field represents an important area for study. In particular, more needs to be understood about what and how students learn about evaluation through practical experiences so practicum evaluation experiences can be refined to maximize students’ learning. To that end, this study used a grounded theory approach to investigate what students learn about evaluation through practical experiences and how they learn through these experiences. Grounded theory is defined by Creswell (2013) as “a qualitative method in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interactions shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (p. 83). A grounded theory approach was used in order to inductively understand the process of learning about evaluation through practical experiences.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis will first review the existing literature around the teaching of evaluation and practical experiences in particular. Following that, the subject of the study, MESI, will be described in greater detail. The methods used for the study will then be described further, followed by a presentation of key themes that emerged. The thesis will close with a discussion of the results, potential implications for the teaching of evaluation, and opportunities for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

“Training evaluators is important – important because of the good that well-trained evaluators can do and because of the mischief that poorly trained evaluators can cause” (Weeks, 1982, p. 21). As described by Trevisan (2004), “One of the most enduring recommendations in literature about the teaching of evaluation is that students receive hands-on or practical experiences during their education” (p. 256). However, the literature on the teaching of evaluation in general, and practical experiences more specifically, tends to be scarce (Fitzpatrick, 1994; Preskill, 2000; Trevisan, 2004).

This study built on the existing literature in order to understand more deeply what students learn about evaluation through practical experiences and how they learn through these experiences. This chapter first reviews the literature calling for practical experiences in the teaching of evaluation and the rationale for those calls. Next, the different types and intensities of practical experiences will be reviewed. The chapter will close with a discussion of the argument for the practicum model, the most intensive type of practical experience, a review of the existing research available on this type of approach, and remaining questions not yet addressed by the literature.

Calls for Practical Experiences in the Teaching of Evaluation

In 1986, *New Directions in Evaluation*, a publication of the American Evaluation Association, issued a volume focused on the teaching of evaluation. In the introductory article of that volume, Davis, the editor of the volume, wrote,

The authors of the chapters in this volume stress the need for teachers to bridge the

gaps between classroom instruction, theory, and on-site experience. These faculty members make some effort to provide students with guided practice in skills that can be acquired only through field experience, individual or group projects, case studies, simulations, or internships. (Davis, 1996, p. 12)

Other early calls for practical experiences as an important component of training in evaluation came from Cronbach et al. (1980) and Chelimsky (1997).

As the last chapter of their book, *Toward the Reform of Program Evaluation*, Cronbach et al. (1980) provided advice for improving the education of evaluators. They suggest that the ideal program would include coursework in evaluation, interdisciplinary seminars, an apprenticeship, and an internship with an agency where policy is formulated. While using slightly different terminology, Cronbach et al.'s idea of an apprenticeship is similar to the call from Davis and others for evaluation students to gain practical experiences as part of their training. Cronbach et al. (1980) compare the evaluator apprenticeship to those more commonly carried out in clinical practice. Just as medical students must learn to apply the knowledge gained in the classroom to specific, real-world scenarios, Cronbach et al. (1980) argue that, "Similarly, the junior evaluator has much to learn from each evaluation in which he takes part, especially if he works shoulder to shoulder with a reflective senior investigator" (p. 348).

The last of the four recommendations by Cronbach et al. (1980), a political internship, is described as a way for students to work with an agency that is a consumer of evaluation to understand the political nature within which evaluation functions and how evaluations get used. Chelimsky (1997) provided a similar argument, calling for the

inclusion of practical experiences in addition to traditional coursework as a way to orient novice evaluators to the political context within which evaluations operate.

Trevisan (2002) adds that, “The rationale for this idea [the inclusion of practical experiences in evaluation] is that didactic course work in evaluation methodology alone is insufficient preparation for the types of challenges often encountered as a professional evaluator” (p. 82). He goes on to say that coursework is likely sufficient for building foundational knowledge, but that the development of skills, such as protocol development, data analysis, and report writing, requires a real-world setting in which the skills can be applied. Similarly, Dewey et al. (2008) found that three of the major gaps between the competencies sought by employers and those held by recent graduates of evaluation programs included writing, research design, and evaluation theory. Their hypothesis is that while these things are likely taught in graduate programs, there are intricacies regarding how they work in real-world settings that are not covered in the classroom. Dewey et al. (2008) argue for practical experiences, including practicums, internships and graduate associateships to help address these gaps.

The other two major gaps Dewey et al. (2008) found between the competencies sought by employers and those held by recent evaluation graduates are interpersonal skills and project and team management. Dewey et al. (2008) suggest that interpersonal skills are not likely to be fully developed in graduate school given that students often work with those who hold a similar mindset to their own. They also feel that typical classroom projects are not likely complex enough for students to fully develop their project and team management skills. Again, practical experiences are recommended as a

mechanism to address these gaps. Nadler and Cundiff (2009) echo this belief, stating that things such as professionalism, practical knowledge, people skills, making professional contacts, and client interactions are core competencies that "...cannot be honed through traditional academic-based training in evaluation; instead, traditional learning is best supplemented with real-world consulting experiences" (p. 593). The idea of practical experiences as an important way to build interpersonal skills is reiterated by Fitzpatrick (1994), who says, "My experience in teaching students, managing evaluation staff and conducting evaluations suggests that the value of the interpersonal and communication skills cannot be overemphasized" (p. 44). She goes on to state that students must develop these skills through both coursework and practical experiences.

Therefore, it appears that practical experiences may be important for the development of a variety of important evaluator competencies, including honing technical skills, such as research design, analysis, and reporting, particularly in the context of their real-world application; understanding the context of evaluation, such as the political nature of evaluation; and building project management and interpersonal skills.

Pulling from Adult Education and Related Relevant Literature

Some researchers calling for practical experiences in evaluation cite relevant literature from other fields that support this approach. In particular, Preskill (1997) references the adult education literature, stating that, "The importance of collaboration, praxis and the facilitation of critical reflection is strongly recommended when teaching this population" (p. 66). Preskill also cites Kolb, a well-known adult education researcher

who talked in-depth about experiential learning. Kolb and Lewis (1986) state that adults become impatient with traditional teaching that seems removed from their lives and explain the benefits of experiential learning by saying, “It teaches people how to acquire, use and evaluate information; arouses motivation and involvement; develops social sensitivity; and allows for mistakes without retribution” (p. 106).

Preskill (2002) also discusses the work of Knowles, who proposed a process-oriented versus content-oriented approach to learning where the educator is responsible for “engaging” students in experiences in which they can acquire knowledge and skills versus “transmitting” knowledge and skills (p. 115). In their text, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) summarize five key assumptions about adult learning that support their process, also referred to as an andragogical approach. These five key assumptions referenced on page 40 of Knowles et al. (2005) include:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy.
2. Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centered.
3. Experience is the richest source for adult’s learning.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.
5. Individual differences among people increase with age.

Weeks (1982), in providing the rationale for his own practicum program, cites the work of Coleman (1976) whose model of experiential education suggests that students must have enough initiative and authority over the experience to ensure they are fully motivated and emotionally invested. Second, students must be involved with the project

for long enough to see the consequences of their actions. Third, students must be encouraged to reflect on their experience and generalize from specific experiences to more broad principles. One way of doing so is by encouraging sharing among multiple students engaged in experiential learning opportunities. Finally, students must have the opportunity to apply the broad principles they learn to a variety of settings.

While various different researchers and models are cited when providing a rationale and structure for practical experiences in evaluation, some similarities exist between them. In particular, the various literature all focuses on the use of practical experiences as a way to encourage deeper investment and motivation among adult learners who are not likely to learn as efficiently from the sole use of the traditional classroom approach. That being said, Trevisan (2004) found, “Across approaches, many of the articles did not specifically address pedagogical theories or frameworks” (p. 266). Therefore, it can be concluded that while pedagogical theories and frameworks do exist that can support the use of practical experiences to teach evaluation and provide some guidance on how they should be structured, there is no single approach that is consistently used, nor do all programs cite existing literature as a rationale for their existence or configuration.

Types of Practical Experiences and Argument for the Practicum Model

In his literature review on practical experiences in evaluation, Trevisan (2004) found that the articles represented four main types of practical experiences in evaluation: simulation, role play, single-course projects, and practicum experiences.

Simulations. Simulations are defined by Jones (2005) as requiring a description of a case and rules to guide student involvement. Trevisan (2004) explains that, “Students

typically work in groups, sometimes over several class sessions, to address questions and assignments associated with the case” (p. 258). Trevisan found only one research article in which the simulation method had been applied to evaluation, but noted there was reason to believe it has been implemented in other situations as well. He notes that the benefits are that it is cost-effective, can be used to highlight many types of experiences, and can increase students’ interest beyond typical classroom experiences. However, a downside to the approach is that “the volatile, unpredictable, and sometimes messy experiences obtained in real-world evaluations are unobtainable in simulations, no matter how creative or life-like the case may be” (p. 258).

Role-plays. The role-play method was suggested by Alkin and Christie (2002) who differentiate it from simulation by saying that it is less structured. In other words, role-play still involves a case of some sort, which students work on in teams, however, as Trevisan (2004) describes, “The role-play maintains flexibility and a dynamic quality, requiring a good deal of imagination on the part of the students, while simulation is largely structured” (p. 259). As with simulation, Alkin and Christie (2002) note that the benefit of this approach is that it is more engaging than the typical classroom lecture. Further, they note that this approach can be more easily carried out in the context of a semester-long class and with less experienced evaluators than could a more traditional evaluation practicum experience. While their article does not address downsides to the approach, one would expect that, as with simulations, role-plays may not be able to fully address the intricacies of real-world evaluation projects.

Single-course projects. A total of eleven articles, the most found for any of the

four types of practical experiences in the Trevisan (2004) literature review, were in regards to single-course projects. Single-course projects can vary greatly in terms of scope, length, and other variables. The single-course project is similar to a role-play or simulation in that it is bounded within the constraints of a semester or year-long course. However, the characteristic that distinguishes a single-course project from a simulation or role-play is that it involves conducting an actual evaluation or part of an evaluation.

Morris (1992) describes how he would ask for requests for evaluation projects from across the University of New Haven. Students would then work in teams over the thirteen-week course to complete the evaluation, including creating an evaluation plan, conducting the evaluation, and submitting a final report. Morris (1992) acknowledges many benefits to this approach, including that students report the experience was very useful and they learned a great deal. However, some limitations are noted, including that the projects must be small-scale in nature to fit within the timeline, which can limit the feasibility of outcome-oriented evaluations. Preskill (1992) utilized a single-course approach and, like Morris, reported that students found the activity helpful, but the limited time available in a semester resulted in challenges in terms of the size of project that could be taken on and the depth of the experience for students. Gredler and Johnson (2001) reiterate these points by saying that small in-class projects tend to exclude complexities seen in the field, while a larger project conducted in a class can hijack the majority of class time and be difficult logistically. Further, they say that in-class projects often focus on the application of technical skills, but that students need to develop “non-methodological” skills as well (p. 98).

Practicum experiences. Like single-course projects, in practicum experiences students carry out real evaluation projects, but unlike single-course projects, practicum experiences are not likely to be confined by the timeline of a graduate course. There are many approaches that can be taken in implementing an evaluation practicum, including differences in the size and scope of projects; the number of students that will be working on each of them; the amount and type of supervision and mentoring to be provided; and whether any compensation will be provided either to the program or to the student in the way of tuition benefits, actual payment, or both.

MESI, housed at the University of Minnesota and described further in Chapter Three, is one type of practicum program. Participation is voluntary, and the program matches students with evaluation projects of varying length and scope, depending on their interest, experience, and available projects. Some students receive compensation in the form of tuition benefits or actual payment, although non-paid positions may arise from time to time. Many students simultaneously enroll in an internship class that provides them with support during their project. Students may also receive support from MESI staff, who set up projects and handle administrative details, such as contract negotiations and billing. Students may work independently or in teams, and some students work on only one project with MESI, while others participate in multiple projects.

Another example of a practicum program is that run by Applied Research Consultants (ARC), which is a student-run consulting firm at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (Nadler & Cundiff, 2009). In this program, students serve as “associates” for

two years while working on their doctoral degree. Students are in charge of all aspects of the consulting firm, from establishing contracts, through the presentation of findings and billing. First-year students shadow second-year students to learn the ropes before taking the lead on an evaluation projects and various tasks of the consulting firm. A weekly seminar is required and provides a chance to discuss projects with other students and the faculty director. Clients are charged for projects, but students do not receive compensation directly. Instead, the funds are used to cover various professional development opportunities for them. Students work on multiple projects, often being involved with over ten projects by the time they graduate.

A third example involves a more active role on the part of a university faculty member. Gredler and Johnson (2001) explain that in their practicum approach "...the faculty member contracts with the client, designs the evaluation, coordinates the activities, completes some aspects of the evaluation and writes the final report" (p. 99). From this description it appears that students working under this approach still complete evaluation tasks, but they have less responsibility for the total project and subsequently more oversight from faculty on their work.

While approaches to practicum experiences vary, Trevisan (2004) describes the practicum experience by saying,

This approach is thought of as the most realistic in that students often work in agencies with on-going evaluations or on funded projects for an extended period of time. Students work directly with clients and may see a project through from start to finish or focus on one or more aspects of an evaluation. Students are typically

given more responsibility over the work. (p. 261)

That is, practicum experiences provide the most intensive opportunity for experiential learning of evaluation. While this approach may not always be feasible, particularly for use within a single course, the practicum overcomes many of the limitations of simulation, role-play, and single-course projects by engaging students in real-world projects and allowing for a more flexible project timeline. The remainder of this paper will focus on this most intensive type of practical experience.

Lack of Research on Teaching Evaluation

Trevisan (2004) was able to find just 18 research articles published between 1978 and 2003 on practical experiences in evaluation. Only five of those articles specifically discussed the most intensive type of practical experiences, the practicum. Further, Trevisan (2004) noted that, “None of the articles in the review were formal research studies. All were descriptions and opinions from faculty supervisors. Articles uniformly discuss benefits of the approach, based on the experience of the authors” (p. 266).

This lack of research on practical experiences in evaluation likely reflects the larger lack of research on the teaching of evaluation more generally. Fitzpatrick (1994) states that, “While we program evaluators appropriately spend much time actually conducting program evaluations and carrying out research or writing on program evaluation issues and problems, we spend comparatively little time considering how to educate evaluators” (p. 41). Fitzpatrick says that the issue is not unique to the field of evaluation.

In an article in the “Tips on Teaching Evaluation” section of the *American Journal of Evaluation* (AJE) in 2000, Preskill wrote that, “For the past several years the AJE has

included a section titled ‘Tips on Teaching Evaluation.’ Few submissions were ever received, a state of affairs the editor and I see as unfortunate given the importance of quality teaching in the field” (p. 103). Preskill (2000) went on to explain the section would be renamed “Teaching Evaluation” as an attempt to broaden the scope of section and encourage more sharing about how best to teach evaluation. However, from 2010 to 2013, only two articles were published in the “Teaching Evaluation” section.

A search of the literature from 2004 through 2013 found one additional article on practicum experiences beyond the five included in the Trevisan’s literature review in 2004: Nadler and Cundiff (2009). An additional article was found that is not a study of a particular practicum program, but that looks instead at the extent to which recent graduates report that various educational experiences, including fieldwork, contributed to the development of their competencies (Dillman, 2013). These two articles will be described in more detail in the following section.

Existing Literature on Practicums in Evaluation

As mentioned previously, Trevisan (2004) was able to find five articles published between 1978 and 2004 on practicum experiences: Gredler and Johnson (2001); McKillip (1986); Moxley and Visingardi (1989); Trevisan (2002); and Weeks (1982). Key findings from these five articles, plus to two additional articles published following the 2004 literature review, will be briefly summarized next.

Gredler and Johnson (2001). As indicated earlier, their approach to an evaluation practicum involves a faculty member contracting with a client and having a doctoral student complete some parts of the evaluation, although the faculty member maintains

control over planning the evaluation, writing the final report, and other aspects in between. Students receive a stipend for their work. Participation is optional, and students must have completed an introductory evaluation course and a statistics course before participating.

Gredler and Johnson (2001) convened a focus group of five students to better understand strengths and challenges of the approach and found that through their practicums students often had perceptions disconfirmed, such as being surprised at how long it takes to obtain buy-in. Additionally, students found that things were messier than what they had learned in class. Students enjoyed being able to observe faculty members in the field and reviewing the final report as a model, building relationships within their program, synthesizing information from multiple classes, and being treated as a professional. Some students wanted to have more context about the programs they were helping to evaluate. The results should be treated with caution given they are based on a single focus group of five students, although the authors did conclude that the experience provided students with advantages above and beyond in-class projects.

Moxley and Visingardi (1989). These authors described one student's experience participating in a practicum for social work students. One student spent approximately 15 hours a week over six months conducting an evaluation of a program in need of process and formative evaluations. The student worked in close collaboration with a faculty member who provided guidance and oversight. The authors of the study provided some reflections on the program, including that the role of the mentor is extremely important – he or she must be accessible and willing to serve in many roles. Additionally, the client

must be accepting of the fact that the student is still learning and be interested in the evaluation. Finally, they noted it is important to have clear contracts and for the student to take related coursework simultaneously. These conclusions appear to be based on their own observations versus any systematic data collection procedures.

Weeks (1982). This author discusses two practicum programs for undergraduate students in human services and public management. One program is short-term (10 weeks), and the other is long-term (one year). A limitation of the findings is that not all participants are evaluation students or are working on evaluations. Students in the long-term program have a week-long orientation and training prior to the start of the project and are guaranteed payment by the agency they intern for. Short-term program participants might not receive payment. All students participate in a half-day seminar each week, which covers formal seminar topics and includes time for problem solving among students. Students work 32 hours a week at their assigned job. Students have a variety of assignments during the program, such as an “Agency Analysis,” a daily journal, and a work plan, among other things. The program is based on James Coleman’s (1976) model of experiential education, in that students work on an entire project from start to finish and are able to make their own decisions and see them play out. Additionally, students have opportunities to discuss their projects in a group which allows them to make deeper meaning of the experience.

Four groups totaling 68 students (11 short-term participants, 22 long-term participants, 18 who chose not to participate, and 7 who had yet to participate) went through assessments over a single day to determine their performance on a variety of

generic skills (e.g., problem solving, judgment, leadership, etc.). Results suggested the long-term program participants scored higher than the other four groups. Short-term participants were statistically similar to those who did not participate. The authors concluded that the short-term program is likely too short, but that the long-term program “...provides important learning gains in a variety of generic skills” (p. 28). Note that neither the skills nor students measured were strictly evaluation-specific.

McKillip (1986). This article discusses the ARC program, presented previously, that involves a student-led consulting firm overseen by an executive director. Doctoral students are required to participate and receive course credit. Before participating, they must have completed some coursework in evaluation, statistics, and applied research. They do not receive direct compensation for their work, but clients are charged a fee that goes towards professional development. Students are expected to work on two projects per year, which is estimated to require 60 hours, plus attend weekly meetings. The program is referred to as a vertical practicum in that more advanced students supervise less advanced students, with faculty supervising the entire program.

This article did not include a formal research study; instead, the author shared his personal experiences with the program. He notes, “They [students] quickly discover that technical aspects of their work are the simplest. The experience of the role of a professional and of the interpersonal skills required for applied research are enriching” (p. 39). He notes a challenge is estimating the time needed for projects and that keys to program success include simplicity and strong quality control by the executive director.

Nadler and Cundiff (2009). This article also discusses the ARC program described

above. The authors conducted interviews and observations with an unstated number of student consultants and found a few challenges for the program, including that students wanted to have more clients external to the University and more qualitative projects. Some students said that the practicum requirement left them with limited free time, although students also requested more projects. Students reported some issues with teamwork, and, as a result, ARC was considering changing the course from pass/fail to a grading scale. One other issue for ARC was maintaining an executive director to oversee students.

While some challenges were identified, Nadler and Cundiff (2009) reported positive findings as well. Per an ongoing client survey that garnered a response from 6 (38%) of ARC's clients, "ARC has consistently been rated between 4.5 and 5 on all items indicating that clients have a high level of satisfaction, a positive assessment of ARC's performance, and rate ARC as adhering to AEA guidelines of evaluation" (p. 599). Anecdotally, the authors state that alumni reported the program being helpful and giving them an advantage when they entered the workforce.

Trevisan (2002). This author discusses a program known as the Assessment and Evaluation Center (AEC). Like ARC, AEC operates as a stand-alone center with a faculty director and a handful of students working on projects. Participation in AEC is optional. Students employed by the center are expected to work 20 hours a week and receive a stipend, tuition remission, benefits, and course credit for an internship. The author notes a key benefit is that students work on one or more projects over an extended period of time and are able to see projects through from inception to completion.

This article did not include a formal research study. Instead, the author shared his observations from the first four years that AEC was running. Like other authors, Trevisan (2002) noted that students developed non-technical skills, such as modifying research designs for a real-world context and gaining trust in the evaluation. Trevisan (2002) states that, “In our view, long-term practical evaluation training may be the only way to effectively develop non-technical knowledge and skills” (p. 86). Challenges include that faculty can get busy dealing with project-related issues and have limited time for attending to mentorship and supervision. Likewise, students can get busy with classes, making it hard to adhere to projects in a timely way. The author also speaks to the issue of challenges with particular students, which can be a burden on faculty and other students.

Dillman (2013). This article was not focused on one particular practicum program, but instead consisted of a survey of graduate students and new evaluators asking about their educational experiences and the impact those experiences had on the development of various evaluation competencies. The survey went out to the 572 American Evaluation Association members who were part of the Graduate Student and New Evaluators Topical Interest Group. A total of 179 responded for a response rate of 31.5%. Students were asked whether they had engaged in coursework, mentorship, fieldwork, and professional activities as part of their evaluation training. Those who had participated in all four were asked to rank which of the four experiences contributed the most to a host of evaluator competencies based on the essential competencies for program evaluators developed by Stevahn, King, Ghore, and Minnema (2005).

A major finding from Dillman (2013) was that “fieldwork, on the whole, is considered to contribute more to the development of evaluation competencies than any other educational experience. Furthermore, it is considered the most important educational experience for developing contextual consideration, project management skills, and effective communication” (p. 280). Coursework was found to be most important for the development of methodological knowledge, although field experiences ranked second in this area. Students felt that field experiences contributed the least to theoretical knowledge. Mentorship, which can go hand in hand with practicum experiences depending on how the program is set up, was least likely to be experienced by students. Only 53% of students reported being mentored versus 88% taking courses, 78% participating in professional activities, and 75% participating in fieldwork. The author determined that this was a cause for concern given the evidence in support of mentorship in evaluation and other fields.

Summary. The seven articles presented above share many similarities in regards to their conclusions on practicum experiences. In particular, all discuss the potential benefits of this approach. Some of the benefits include the development of non-technical skills and the building of a professional identity. Many of the articles talk about the importance of the mentor’s role as well as the challenges of filling that position.

Among the six articles focusing on specific practicum programs, differences were seen in terms of the organizational structure of each of the program. The six articles discussed a total of five unique practicum programs. The five programs seemed to fall on a continuum of faculty-led projects with student support on one end to a primarily

student-led consulting firm on the other end, with some programs in between.

Additionally, the programs differed in terms of benefits to students, whether it be direct pay, tuition remission, course credit, and/or funding for professional development.

Table 1 provides a brief summary of the seven articles on practicum experiences in evaluation. The studies vary greatly in terms of when they were published, with three being published in the 1980s, two being published at the turn of the 21st century, and two being more recently published. Furthermore, they vary in terms of their methodological rigor. Two of the articles are case narratives where someone associated with the program shared their observations without collecting any formal data. Three of the articles involved some data collection, though it tended to be small and informal in nature. Weeks (1982) and Dillman (2013) stand out as the two more formal research studies of practicum programs in evaluation.

Table 1

Summary of Existing Literature on Evaluation Practicum Programs

Year	Study	Context	Method	N
2001	Gredler and Johnson	Faculty consulting with graduate student participation	Single focus group (or group interview)	5 students
1989	Moxley and Visingardi	1 student/social work graduate student project	Case study	1 student
1982	Weeks	Short- and long-term internships for undergraduate human services and public management students; not all evaluation projects	Performance assessment using simulation and a quasi-experimental design	68 students (33 who had completed an internship)
1986	McKillip	The Applied Psychology Program (ARC) – a student-led consulting firm for applied psychology doctoral students	Case narrative	N/A
2009	Nadler and Cundiff	ARC Program (same as above)	Client survey; student interviews and observations	6 of 16 clients; number of students not stated
2002	Trevisan	Assessment and Evaluation Center (AEC) – a stand-alone center for graduate students focused on student assessment and evaluation	Case narrative	N/A
2013	Dillman	Not a practicum program – survey of AEA’s Graduate Student and New Evaluators Topical Interest Group	Survey (perceptions)	179 out of 572 members

Discussion of the Literature

There are many calls for practical experiences in evaluation and a belief that these experiences are necessary for the development of particular evaluator competencies,

including, but not limited to, non-technical skills. There is literature from other fields that support practical experiences and even provide suggestions for how experiences should be structured. However, formal research on practical experiences in program evaluation is quite limited.

There are multiple types of practical experiences that differ in intensity, with practicum experiences generally being the most intense in terms of their real-world setting and the length of time spent on the project. Of the seven articles on practicum experiences, two of them were strictly the personal observations and reflections of the authors. Altschuld (1995) spoke to the limitations of personal observations by saying that his own article about reflections setting up an evaluation training program should be thought of as "...a selective recollection and interpretation of events and challenges rather than a case study of the program and its history" (p. 260). Only two of the articles involved formal research studies, with the remaining three articles including fairly informal data collection procedures.

Due to the limited formal research on practicum experiences, Trevisan (2004) notes that several research questions remain unanswered, such as, "What is the optimum split between didactic course work and practical training?" and "How should practical training be structured?" (p. 270). Even Dillman (2013), which consists of a formal research study, notes that questions remain regarding how to structure practical learning experiences, including that, "Additional research about what and how students learn through their work in the field is necessary to support these determinations" (p. 281). This study will address that particular question.

Chapter 3

The Intervention

The Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI) is housed at the University of Minnesota. It began in 1996 as a one-week training conference for graduate students and other novice evaluators interested in learning more about the field of evaluation. MESI expanded in 2011 to become an interdisciplinary training institute for program evaluation at the University of Minnesota. As part of that expansion, MESI staff began matching graduate students with evaluation projects at the University of Minnesota, as well as within the local community. It is MESI's goal to simultaneously meet the demands of the local community in terms of evaluation capacity building while also providing important training opportunities for graduate students at the University of Minnesota. The Director of MESI is a faculty member of the Evaluation Studies Program, housed in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development within the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. However, MESI serves students from across the University, including students majoring in education, public health, and public policy, among others. MESI caters to students in both master's and doctoral programs.

MESI's four stated goals per their website (www.evaluation.umn.edu) are to:

1. Build an interdisciplinary network of program evaluators across the University
2. Provide high quality evaluator training and professional development
3. Provide high quality, low cost evaluation consulting, technical assistance, and capacity building

4. Conduct research and development for program evaluation

How the Practical Experience Process Works

Students may hear about opportunities to participate in evaluation experiences through MESI via multiple outlets, including an evaluation-related course offered by the Evaluation Studies program or the MESI Spring Training. They may also be referred by one of the several instructors who teach and/or are familiar with evaluation in the University's other graduate programs.

Master's and doctoral students in the Evaluation Studies program have an internship requirement, as do those obtaining a program evaluation minor or certificate. To meet this requirement, students must obtain work on an evaluation project over the course of a semester while periodically attending a class where they meet with other students and a faculty member to discuss their progress and issues related to the practice of evaluation. Students do not have to obtain their internships via MESI, although it provides a helpful opportunity, particularly for those who have limited connections outside of the University. Likewise, some degree programs outside of the Evaluation Studies program also have internship requirements that may cause students to seek out MESI projects. In addition, students seek out MESI projects separate from internship requirements for extra financial assistance, to build their evaluation expertise, or both. Typically, students are required to have taken an introductory evaluation course prior to enrolling in the program.

Potential clients may learn about the low-cost (now called cost-effective) evaluation opportunities that MESI offers via multiple sources, including the MESI website, by

taking an evaluation course at the University of Minnesota, at the Spring Training, and through word of mouth.

Projects vary in length and size, ranging anywhere from a couple of months to a year or more. Compensation varies as well. Not surprisingly, the program does not have trouble finding clients looking for evaluation services at no cost. However, many MESI student evaluators do receive compensation for their work, often in the form of an hourly wage and occasionally in the form of an assistantship, which includes tuition assistance. The size and timeline of a project will help dictate whether a single student will be assigned to work on it or whether a partnership or team approach would be better. These details are worked out between the client and MESI's Coordinator prior to signing a contract and commencing work¹.

Students who are simultaneously enrolled in an internship course will often receive mentorship and support for their project from their instructor and the other students in the course. Additionally, MESI faculty and staff are available to provide students with guidance as needed. Clients may be a source of support, although this largely depends on the client's level of evaluation expertise.

Amount of Engagement to Date

From its inception in 2011 through 2013, it is estimated that MESI has had over 70 student evaluators work on projects for at least 34 clients. Students have come from programs as diverse as evaluation, public affairs, public health, curriculum and instruction, and higher education. Clients have included University departments, diverse

¹ A part-time Associate Director served this role prior to October, 2013. At that time the Institute was able to hire its first full-time staff person, and the title was changed to Coordinator.

non-profits, and local foundations, among others. Table 2 provides examples of recent MESI projects.

Table 2

Sampling of Recent MESI Projects

Project Name	Brief description	Budget
Anoka-Hennepin Indigenous Education Project	Evaluation study of the Anoka-Hennepin School District's Indian Education programming	\$6,426.37
Office of Student Affairs	Evaluation project for the University of Minnesota's Office of Student Affairs to better understand the various aspects of the student experience as it relates to internationalization	~\$9,000.00
Sabathani project	Evaluation of the Sabathani Community Center's Eliminating Health Disparity Initiative	\$9,182.03
Angel Foundation Project	Evaluation of a non-profit whose mission is to help families deal with a parental cancer diagnosis	~\$10,000.00
MN Historical Society	Evaluation of all programming for the MN Historical Society	\$22,166.41
Hennepin County Stable Families Project	Evaluation of the impact of the Hennepin County Stable Families Project on family shelter demand in Hennepin County	\$50,000.00

Structure of MESI

MESI is overseen by its Director, who is faculty member in the Evaluation Studies Program. At the time of this study, MESI's day-to-day operations were managed by a half-time Associate Director who was an alumna of the Evaluation Studies program. In consultation with the Director, the Associate Director was in charge of establishing contracts with clients, overseeing all students on their projects, and engaging in other MESI-related tasks, such as planning trainings. Two 20-hour per week graduate

assistantships provided additional support to the Institute. Additionally, an interdisciplinary advisory board made up of faculty and students from across the University as well as evaluators in the community meets occasionally to provide guidance to MESI. Following the conclusion of this study and the departure of the then Associate Director, MESI was able to acquire funding for a full-time staff person with the title of Coordinator.

Research and Evaluation of MESI

One of MESI's goals is to conduct research on evaluation training. To meet this goal, MESI has begun conducting research and evaluation of its own work. In 2013, a program theory was developed for MESI both to more clearly specify how MESI intends to reach its goals and to serve as a framework for MESI's own research agenda (Pleasant, 2013). Also, in 2013, a survey was administered to 34 past clients to determine strengths and opportunities of the program from their perspective (Gensinger, 2013). A total of 25 clients responded to the survey, a response rate of 74%. Key findings from the survey included that clients felt that students do great work, particularly in the areas of professionalism, responsiveness, interpersonal skills and communication. Clients reported that they learned things about evaluation through the process. They did note that areas for improvement for students included project and time management, as well as writing and presentation skills. They also noted that it can be challenging working with the University in terms of billing and the inflexibility of the academic calendar. Finally, they wanted more follow-up from MESI staff following the conclusion of projects. A survey of MESI student consultants is planned for later in 2014 to better understand

students' experiences with the program.

Additional information about MESI can be found at its website:

www.evaluation.umn.edu.

Chapter 4

Methods

Design of the Study

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who participated in at least one MESI-sponsored evaluation consultancy to better understand how students learn and what they learn via their MESI experiences. This study was conducted in the spirit of grounded theory, which is defined by Creswell (2013) as “a qualitative method in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interactions shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (p. 83).

Grounded theory was chosen because the goal of this research study was to better understand the *process* of learning about evaluation through practical experiences. Grounded theory is particularly adept at understanding processes (Creswell, 2013). Further, given the limited literature available on the topic, it was important that the study utilize an inductive approach, in which the data be analyzed without preconceived ideas or hypotheses about what would be found. This is in contrast to a deductive approach where the researcher would go into the study with a hypothesis or more specific idea of what he or she was looking to prove or disprove. As Charmaz (2006) explains, “Thus, we build levels of abstraction directly from the data, and subsequently, gather additional data to check and refine our emerging analytic categories. Our work cumulates in a ‘grounded theory,’ or an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (p. 4).

Ethical Approval

This study received IRB approval (IRB code number 1304P31165) from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board on April 16, 2013.

Sampling

Ten students were selected to participate using a theoretical sampling approach. In theoretical sampling, participants are chosen who will best help the researcher to form the theory (Creswell, 2013). To that end, all participants had to have participated in at least one MESI consultancy² and have met the following criteria:

1. Participated in a consultancy that lasted at least three months
2. Completed their first MESI project within the past year and a half

The minimum length of the consultancy was fairly arbitrary, but was put in place to ensure that the student's experience was sufficient to expect at least some growth. The time since completion was meant to ensure that the experience was recent enough that students could thoroughly recall details.

Further, students who had extensive evaluation experience prior to their engagement with MESI were screened out in order to focus on those who had more to learn. Lastly, half of the students sampled were working on a major outside of the Evaluation Studies program to understand the experiences both of those studying evaluation in depth as well as those studying evaluation more peripherally.

The first two students sampled were considered "intensive" participants of MESI; both students had participated in at least two MESI projects. These two interviews were

² MESI originally called these projects internships, but changed the name to consultancies because students are providing consulting services rather than working as an intern in the organizations in which they work.

conducted to get information from those who had truly experienced the program in great detail. Next, the researcher worked with MESI staff to identify an additional six students to be sampled who were considered to be “typical cases,” participants who had fairly common MESI experiences in terms of the number and length of evaluations they participated in. That said, experiences with MESI vary greatly from participant to participant and that variation was seen amongst these six participants.

Following these eight interviews, the researcher reviewed the information that had been collected to help ensure saturation, or the assurance that all perspectives have been obtained. To this end, discriminant sampling, in which the researcher gathers information from people who are different from those already studied (Creswell, 2013), was employed in order to gather information from less typical cases. The researcher determined that the sample was heavy on participants who had started working with MESI a year to a year and a half ago, while experiences from those starting more recently were scarce. Therefore, the researcher worked with MESI staff to sample two additional participants who had participated in their first MESI project within the last six months. At this point, the researcher determined that saturation had been achieved, as the same themes were reoccurring. Therefore, no additional interviews were employed.

Sample characteristics. All but two of the participants were female, which reflects the demographic of MESI participants in general. As mentioned earlier, the researcher purposely sampled half evaluation majors and half from other programs in order to understand the perspectives of a wide range of students. Other majors included public health, public policy, higher education, and curriculum and instruction. There was a mix

of doctoral students (four), master's students (five), and one person who was not seeking a degree at the time of her MESI projects. The median age was 25, with a wide range from 23 to 62 years of age.

All but two of the students had taken at least an introductory evaluation course before their first project. The other two had attended a MESI training. Half of the students had some previous evaluation experience of some sort, although they may not have led an evaluation prior to MESI. The majority of participants (seven) worked on multiple projects through MESI. The typical length for a first project was five months – or a little over a semester, although the range was two months to 19 months. Considering all projects together, students spent a median of nine months total working on MESI projects, although not necessarily consecutively.

Recruitment

Once selected for the study, MESI staff sent an initial email to the selected participants letting them know they had been selected as potential participants for a research study about their experiences with MESI. The email asked their permission to share their contact information with the researcher. All selected participants ultimately agreed to share their information with the researcher, at which time the researcher contacted them with more information about the study via email and followed up via telephone to determine whether they were interested in participating. The scripts of the first three contacts can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection Instruments

Participants completed two types of information as part of the study: 1) a brief questionnaire, and 2) an hour-long interview. These two data collection instruments are described below.

Questionnaire. Prior to the interview, students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire that collected background information regarding their program of study; their evaluation-related experience prior to, during, and after their consultancy; their participation in MESI consultancies (total consultancies and length of consultancies); as well as some brief demographic information (gender and age). A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Interview questions. Semi-structured interview questions were developed to address the research questions associated with this study. A total of ten main interview questions were created and asked of all participants, although unique follow-up questions and probes were utilized to "... get depth and detail on events or steps in a process, as well as the meaning of concepts and themes" and to "encourage the interviewer to keep talking and stay on topic, ask for clarification, or ask for evidence and examples" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 119). Further, in the spirit of the Responsive Interviewing approach suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012), particular strategies such as asking for specific examples and asking for comparisons to other types of learning experiences were utilized to ensure the data gathered would have sufficient detail, depth, vividness, nuance, and richness. Finally, given the grounded theory approach utilized for this study, many of the

questions began with “what” and “how” to solicit responses from participants about the actions and processes they went through to complete their evaluation project(s) and in learning evaluation through that experience.

Participants were first asked about their reasons for getting involved with MESI. Next, they were asked to talk through their evaluation experience. The remaining section consisted of questions about what they learned and how the evaluation contributed to that learning. A draft of the interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Data Collection Procedures

A total of nine of the ten interviews were conducted in person either on the University of Minnesota campus or at a nearby coffee shop convenient to the participant. One interview was conducted over the telephone due to the fact that the participant had graduated and was living out of the town.

Interviews began by having the researcher talk through the consent form with participants and discussing any questions they had about the study. Participants then signed the consent form (see Appendix D) and completed the questionnaire. The interview itself took between 42 minutes and an hour and a half to complete, with a median of one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To ensure information was being interpreted correctly, each participant was emailed a summary of key themes from his or her interview. They were given the opportunity to make corrections or additions as they saw fit. Four students stated that their summaries looked good and that they had no changes and four provided some

minimal clarification or additional detail. The remaining two students did not provide a response.

Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using NVivo 10. Different from a traditional approach in which analysis does not begin until all data collection has been completed, a constant comparative approach was used in which preliminary analysis took place throughout the data collection phase. This was done to identify whether changes should be made to the interview protocol to gather information needed to fully develop the theory. The constant comparative model is also useful for determining whether saturation has been achieved (Creswell, 2013).

Data were coded according to the approach outlined by Charmaz (2006):

Grounded theory coding consists of at least two main phases: 1) an initial phase involving naming each word, line or segment of data followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data. (p. 46)

The initial phase of coding was done throughout the data collection period so the author could understand emerging trends and remaining gaps and probe accordingly in subsequent interviews. Moreover, rather than the line-by-line approach to coding that is frequently used in grounded theory, an incident to incident approach was used in which key incidents were coded. Charmaz (2006) notes that this approach can help you "... identify properties of your emerging concept" (p. 53).

Process coding was utilized during the initial coding phase whenever possible. Process coding involves coding using “-ing” words to preserve the actions that participants are describing. One example would be the code of “gaining confidence” versus “confidence.” When possible, in vivo codes were also utilized during this phase. In vivo codes utilize the actual words used by respondents in the name of the code. For example, the code “seeing self as evaluator” came about from one respondent’s description of being able to see himself as an evaluator after his evaluation project. In regards to these two strategies, Charmaz (2006) states that, “Staying close to the data and, when possible, starting from the words and actions of your respondents, preserves the fluidity of their experience and gives way to new ways of looking at it” (p. 49).

Following the completion of all ten interviews and all initial coding, the researcher moved into the focused coding phase. Charmaz (2006) explains that, “Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). To this end, the interview transcripts and codes were reread and initial codes were combined, consolidated, and refined. A tree structure was utilized in NVivo to develop categories and subcategories of codes. Finally, a model was created that visually displays the theory. A thorough description of the various components of the model and how they fit together is presented in the next chapter.

With the exception of a brief review of the literature to determine that there was in fact a gap in the literature around practical experiences in evaluation, the literature review for this study was done after all coding had taken place. This was intentional and

ensured that existing research did not unduly influence the coding process. Following coding, the literature review was conducted, and the researcher looked for potential similarities and differences with the literature that may contribute to a greater knowledge base for building strong practicum evaluation programs.

Chapter 5

Results

This chapter describes the themes that arose from the ten qualitative interviews conducted as part of the study. The themes are broken out by the two main research question associated with this study:

- 1) What do students learn through practical experiences?
- 2) How do students learn through practical experiences?

Selected respondents' quotations, indicated by italics, are included to illuminate each of the themes. This chapter concludes with the presentation of a model that illustrates the relationships between the various themes in order to better understand the process involved with learning evaluation through practical experiences.

Research Question 1: What did students learn?

This first research question focuses on the perceived outcomes respondents reported as a result of their practical experiences. While the research question was initially intended to measure gains in knowledge and skills, it became clear through the interviews that students experienced gains in other areas as well, which will be described further in this section. Table 3 summarizes the main themes associated with this research question. These themes are described in more detail in the remainder of the section.

Table 3

Summary of Research Question #1 – What did students learn?

Theme	Category	Sample Quotations
Gaining knowledge and skills	Honing technical skills	“We talked to [our mentor] a lot about observations and how you do that in a program setting; that’s something that neither [my partner] nor I were familiar with, how to capture or analyze our observation notes and she gave us really good resources and templates on how to do that.”
	Learning the softer side of evaluation	“The donors would love to hear the word resilience used, but that doesn't mean the same thing to everybody.”
	Understanding evaluation context	“I came in thinking this is such a simple idea and knowing they’re going to laugh at me... and then when I shared it, people said it made everything so clear. To be able to do that - the ability to simplify things.”
It is not just about knowledge	Gaining confidence	“Just putting them [the evaluation components] all together was overwhelming. But I did it, and I feel proud of doing that.”
	Seeing self as evaluator	“At the conference when they’re like, ‘Raise your hand if you consider yourself an evaluator,’ I raised my hand because it is what I do.”
	Understanding self as evaluator	“I also realized in the process that one of my strengths is the interpreting and formatting of data and presenting that in a way that is understandable... And that I don’t like quantitative analysis. I like coordinating it, but I don’t like doing it.”
	Building future job opportunities	“I talked about this in job interviews more than anything else, probably because it’s a project I mostly had ownership of where I managed a lot of people and had a lot of tasks and challenges and obstacles.”
There are other factors	N/A	“I’ve worked on other projects outside of the [MESI project,] and I’ve finished my master’s degree and started the Ph.D. program... So I feel like it’s really hard to say that it’s just MESI. But I would not be as confident if MESI wasn’t in the picture, if MESI wasn’t a part of my experience.”

Theme 1: Gaining Knowledge and Skills

Students described three main categories of learning related to their experiences: technical skills, soft skills, and evaluation context.

Honing technical skills. The majority of respondents (eight out of the ten) talked about how they had developed or honed their technical skills related to conducting an evaluation as a result of their MESI project(s). A total of three of the ten respondents talked about how they learned something related to planning an evaluation. Those who learned about evaluation planning said it was one of the most important things they learned. Learning or improving skills related to data collection and analysis were noted by eight of the ten respondents. Two examples included learning how to collect observational data and how to code qualitative data. Three people described learning about challenges related to certain methods, such as the low response rates with online surveys and challenges with getting people together for focus groups.

Learning the softer side of evaluation. In addition to the more technical aspects of evaluation, all but one of the respondents reported learning or improving on at least one less technical aspect of evaluation. This theme was termed the “softer side” of evaluation and reflected things that help an evaluation go smoothly. Three of the main things included in this category are discussed below.

Six of the students said they learned about the importance of gaining a clear understanding of the purpose, audience, or other context of the evaluation up front. Half of all students talked about learning how to interact with clients. This quotation is from a student who talked about the need to balance what the client wants with good practice:

“The donors would love to hear the word resilience used, but that doesn't mean the same thing to everybody.” The respondent went on to discuss how he had to work with the client to explain why that wording would not be best for a survey. Four respondents talked about time management. A few examples of learning related to time management included being reasonable about what you can accomplish, learning about how long things take, staying focused, and balancing thoroughness with timeliness.

Understanding evaluation context. Finally, all but one of the respondents mentioned learning something about the context of evaluation – or the terrain that an evaluator works in. For example, four students said they gained a greater understanding of people's perceptions of evaluation, such as the fact that people's reactions are not always favorable or that some people do not understand what evaluation entails. Here is an example of a student who described how working on her project helped her to see that not everyone thinks evaluatively by nature and that an evaluator can provide a lot of assistance in that area: *“I came in thinking this is such a simple idea and knowing they're going to laugh at me... and then when I shared it, people said it made everything so clear. To be able to do that - the ability to simplify things.”*

Half of respondents talked about how their experiences helped them build their own understanding of what evaluation looks like and entails, including that there are lots of ways to do it. This quotation is from one student who described her evolved understanding of evaluation as a result of the MESI experience: *“Evaluation is a way of thinking... There are lots of things besides just data collection... In this case they really just needed help articulating their program theory.”* One student talked about how it

helped her differentiate between research and evaluation, while another respondent said it left lingering questions in that area because the project she worked on seemed like it might actually be more research-oriented.

See Appendix E for a complete list of the things participants reported learning.

Theme 2: It Is Not Just About Knowledge

While the original focus of the research question was on what was *learned*, it became clear during the analysis that respondents were talking about many benefits outside of gains in learning. These additional gains are described below.

Gaining confidence. Early in the interview students were asked to describe their first day on the project. Overwhelmingly, people talked how they were at least a little scared or intimidated. Two examples are included below:

“I thought I was just going to help, you know? It just seemed really, really intimidating and very, very scary.”

“Just overcoming the feeling that it was my first project, and I don’t know much about evaluation.”

Some people thought they would just be helping a more experienced evaluator and were worried that they were not going to know what to do. It is important to note that at the same time people said they were scared, they were excited as well, but a lack of confidence in their abilities was certainly something they had to overcome.

After their projects, all but one reported being more confident in their ability as an evaluator. Many reported that just the act of pulling off a project helped them feel more confident in their abilities. Here is one example: *“Just putting them [the evaluation*

components] all together was overwhelming. But I did it, and I feel proud of doing that.”

The one student who did not report an increase in confidence said she felt more confident in focus group facilitation skills, but because the project was more research-oriented, it did not help build confidence as an evaluator.

Seeing self as evaluator. On a similar note, few students said they would consider themselves an evaluator going into their first project, but many said they would consider themselves an evaluator, at least to some extent, after completing their project(s). For example, *“At the conference when they're like, ‘Raise your hand if you consider yourself an evaluator,’ I raised my hand because it is what I do.”*

Some talked about how this helped them with networking in that they had something to talk about with other people or in class. The student from the previous example, who said he raised his hand at a conference when asked about being an evaluator, went on to say he thought that was important because it helped him engage more with other evaluators. He felt comfortable joining conversations because he felt he had something to share. Another student talked about how she met other evaluators along the way and felt that she had a much larger network of people she could go to with questions.

Although most students reported gains in confidence, they did acknowledge they still had more to learn, which they believed would come with time and more experiences. For example, one student prefaced seeing herself as an evaluator by saying, *“I would say I'm a novice evaluator. I still think there is so much to learn.”* A few students talked

about how their projects had been fairly simple, so they were not sure how confident they would be taking on more complex projects yet.

Understanding self as evaluator. Four respondents talked about how their projects helped them understand what kind of evaluator they are going to be, including their strengths and weaknesses as well as their specific interests in the field. The quotation below is from a student who realized she was really good at interpreting and presenting data, but did not like quantitative analysis. For a future project, she made sure to work with another student who was quantitatively-oriented:

I also realized in the process that one of my strengths is the interpreting and formatting of data and presenting that in a way that is understandable... And that I don't like quantitative analysis. I like coordinating it, but I don't like doing it.

Another respondent was really surprised to learn he enjoyed qualitative analysis when he had always seen himself as a quantitative person.

Building future job opportunities. Four of the respondents said they think their projects will help them in the future. Two students talked about discussing their projects in job interviews. Here is one example: *"I talked about this in job interviews more than anything else, probably because it's a project I mostly had ownership of where I managed a lot of people and had a lot of tasks and challenges and obstacles."*

One student said he had already been told by his MESI clients that there would always be a project for them. This assured the student as he felt that even if he could not get a full-time job right away, he would have evaluation projects to work on. Two students had already completed an additional project for a client separate from MESI.

Theme 3: There Are Other Factors

It is important to note that half of all respondents discussed something besides MESI that had an influence on their knowledge or confidence, including coursework, other jobs, evaluation conferences, reading blogs, etc. Therefore, it is important not to attribute all of the gains described previously to MESI alone. For example, just under half of the participants took additional evaluation coursework while working on their MESI project, and just over half worked on a non-MESI evaluation project at the same time as their MESI project – often as an assistantship. As a result of the overlapping experiences, respondents discussed how it was hard to weed out the impact of MESI on its own. However, respondents said that MESI certainly played a big role in the gains they described. The quotation below illustrates this point:

I've worked on other projects outside of the [MESI project,] and I've finished my master's degree and started the Ph.D. program... So I feel like it's really hard to say that it's just MESI. But I would not be as confident if MESI wasn't in the picture, if MESI wasn't a part of my experience.

Research Question 2: How did students learn?

The second research question was more process-oriented and focused on how students learned via their practical experiences. Four main themes came to light.

Theme 4: Peer Learning Is Comforting and Helpful

All but three of the respondents worked with someone else on at least one of their projects. Of those who worked with others, four of the students worked exclusively with partners, while the other three had solo and partner or, in one case, group experiences.

Splitting tasks. Most of the students who worked with a partner talked about how they split tasks between each other. In some cases it was due to not having the time to do all of the work themselves. In other cases their partner did a task because it was not one of the respondent's strengths or the respondent did not have an interest in that task. For example, one student went into her project wanting to learn quantitative analysis, but her partner had more expertise in that area and ultimately took on that task. In the end, she wished she had at least sat down with her partner to learn from him.

Learning from others. However, most of the students who worked in pairs did say they learned things from their partner. For example, one respondent shared, *"I would always go on a tangent... but he was always really good about pulling me back and being like, well, we have to focus on these five questions. Let's just stick with what we have... He kept us on track."* Another student shared, *"[My partner] had a lot of experience doing that kind of thing (qualitative analysis) and doing reporting, and so I definitely learned a lot more in that skill area."* Therefore, it seems that it is possible to learn new things when using the splitting or avoiding method, although it is unknown whether students could have learned more if they had been more hands on.

Finding comfort. One other thing that people in partnerships noted was that it was comforting to have someone else working on the project with them. They enjoyed having someone to brainstorm with and another set of eyes on things. One respondent explained, *"I wouldn't be in a panic mode at all because I know there is this person who is also working with me on this..."* Someone who did her first project with a partner before moving on to solo projects talked about how working with a partner helped her

feel calmer. She went on to say that even though her partner was not directing her about what to do, it was just nice having him there. She suggests that all first projects include a partner since it can be scary when a student is first getting started. The use of partnerships may be an important way for people to handle the lack of confidence that respondents reported when first starting their MESI projects.

Brainstorming solutions with a group. Half of the respondents discussed taking an internship class during their MESI project, and all of them said it was helpful. A few said it was helpful to talk with the instructor or at least to have a professional facilitating the conversation, but what they really stressed was how helpful it was to talk with the other students. They often brainstormed with the group about issues in their project. Here is one example: *“They just always had ideas about ways to do things or approach things, and hearing about their projects there would also often be similar things that would come up. Like what to do if you’re not hearing back from someone...”* They found it helpful to hear what others were doing, both because other students often had similar issues they could apply to their project and because it just gave them a broader sense of the field.

Requests for more sharing. As described previously, students who took the internship class found it to be really helpful. One of those respondents said it would be nice if MESI facilitated other student connections and sharing outside of the internship class because there is a limited amount of time to share in class. Two others who did not do the internship class also thought it would be nice for MESI to facilitate student get-togethers so people could share and learn from each other. One said, *“It would be nice to have some sort of get-togethers or meeting times where you can just come and utilize the*

space there for a problem. Do a thing where everybody meets and just hangs out so you know more people and you can learn what they're doing and learn from them."

Theme 5: Mentor Support Is Important, but Tricky

Every student received guidance from a mentor at least once during his or her project, although the amount and type of mentorship varied greatly. A few different types are described below.

Extensive mentorship. There were a few cases where the student worked quite closely with a mentor, particularly in the beginning when the mentor would give them background on the project and set them up for what steps should be taken. In one example, a respondent described that the mentor explained Utilization-Focused Evaluation to their partnership and gave them a table to fill out from left to right to plan the evaluation. They would check in with their mentor at each step and their mentor gave them tips along the way. The respondent was fairly new to evaluation and noted this was helpful in making sure she did everything needed and in the correct order.

Mentorship as requested. More common was when students took the lead on determining what to do, but checked in with their mentor for feedback, either at set times or in a more *ad hoc* fashion when they got stuck. Students frequently reported their mentors gave them resources, such as a tool for observational analysis or sample reports. Additionally, they found it helpful to give something to their mentor to confirm that it was correct. Similar to the idea of a partner being comforting, it seems that the mentor's approval was an important source of comfort for students with limited confidence.

Minimal mentorship. Four of the students reported working on at least one project where they had really minimal interaction with a mentor and perhaps were not sure whether they did have a designated mentor.

Internal versus external mentors. Three of the students had mentors from the programs they were working with versus someone from MESI. Two of these students reported highly positive feedback regarding this relationship, saying that the mentor was really able to help them understand important organizational background information that a MESI mentor may not have known. The remaining seven respondents had mentors associated with MESI, including the Director, Associate Director, or an advanced MESI participant.

Requests for more mentorship. Four students said it would have been helpful if they had received more support from MESI. They suggested perhaps having students assist more advanced evaluators so they could learn from their thought process. One respondent explained, *“I could get feedback from [my mentor] when I needed it, but also being a graduate student, we weren’t working alongside anyone. And there was no one modeling, really.”* A few respondents said it would have been nice to have more of a reflection at the end where their mentor told them what they did well and what they should work on. One student said their mentor did this and found it was extremely valuable. Another student said she thought more mentor support would have been helpful, but probably only if the mentor had some content expertise since that is what they struggled with. As indicated above, respondents with mentors from outside MESI reported that their mentors were helpful with understanding program context.

The tricky balance with mentorship. Even though some students requested more support, they suggested that it is complicated. Students talked about how having the freedom to try things out helped them learn, and they might not have learned as much if they were just following directions. One example is below.

I felt like I felt confidence because my decisions that I decided to do for my first evaluation project were allowed. And I was able to practice some of the things I wanted to do. And if someone micro managed too much, it could maybe deter that confidence because someone would just be basically following the lead of the mentor. So it gave me that flexibility, but still having that mentor gave me the opportunity to have more freedom to try things that I thought would work.

Need for resources. A couple of students talked about how they needed resources during their projects, such as information on how to do observational analysis. They said it would have been nice if MESI had a portal or library they could go to where the information would be easily accessible and trustworthy. A resource portal or library may be an additional, fairly inexpensive source of support for students.

Theme 6: Internal Ways of Learning

The last two themes focused on how other people (partners, mentors) help or hinder students' growth. This theme focuses more on the internal processes respondents reported as being helpful to their growth.

Overcoming roadblocks. Building on the idea of not providing too much support, respondents talked about how they learned from things that did not go so smoothly, such as a low response rate to a survey. While it would be great for every

evaluation to go smoothly, problems appear to be key learning points for students. This quotation describes a key takeaway for one respondent that resulted from something not going smoothly: *“I think partly, the importance of getting people on board. Because that was where we sort of ran into a lot of road blocks...”* This could be an example of why the balance of mentorship is tricky – students need the tools and support to succeed, but allowing students the opportunity to make mistakes or encounter issues may create important learning opportunities. One student reflected on learning how to best do observations: *“You know we were figuring out what the best way to do it was as we were going, because you know if somebody was just telling us, I don't think we would have learned as much as we learned about what to observe.”*

Pushing through the uncomfortable. Half of the respondents discussed learning from stressful or awkward situations. For example, a couple of students were really hesitant to contact people for surveys, but once they tried it, they learned that people generally do not mind giving a little of their time and enjoy being given a voice. Another student talked about how he felt awkward doing observations and realized it was not so bad as long as you were up front about who you were and what you were doing. Other students talked about gaining confidence in presenting and working with people remotely. It seems that overcoming uncomfortable situations really resonated with people and helped them to learn and gain confidence. Because people learn by being pushed to do things they are initially uncomfortable with, the splitting/avoiding technique that respondents reported using in their partnerships could potentially result in missed opportunities for growth.

Observing, reflecting and comparing. Half of respondents talked about how it was really helpful to make sure to observe and listen so they could take in and understand as much as possible. Two students said they wished they had taken more time to stop and reflect, either by documenting what they did during their project or just by taking time to think about what they were doing and how it applied to things they were doing in class.

One respondent shared,

I wish I would have written down more of this stuff. I guess I can read my reflections I wrote for [my internship] course. Just sort of wish I had better documented all the things like obstacles that came up or moments in the project when I didn't know what to do next. I would have probably learned more if I had done more of that.

One student did document all the main things she did in her projects via binders. Students who did multiple projects also started making comparisons between them to help refine their ideas about evaluation. For example, one student who worked for the University and for a nonprofit made observations about the different needs and culture around evaluation in those situations. This could be a reason why multiple projects can be a good thing.

Investing more time. Similar to reflection, some respondents said they wished they had taken more time to research through Internet searches or textbooks, learn from their partner, or talk with the client in order to learn more effectively. A few students noted that they did not do more of this because they did not have time.

Theme 7: Coursework as Complementary

All respondents were asked about how learning through practical experiences compares to learning in the classroom, and there was certainly agreement that students need both. Respondents talked about how actually having to apply something reaffirmed that they had understood and retained it. They also talked about how applying something, like developmental evaluation, for example, helped it to make more sense. Finally, over half of the students talked about how you just cannot create the same atmosphere in a classroom. Evaluation in the real world is messier and involves things like stakeholders that are not covered in depth in classes. Moreover, it can be hard to truly apply yourself in the classroom when it is less high stakes. Here is one example: *“It just didn’t feel real. Just doing something for an assignment, so I didn’t really think that deeply about it.”* A full list of respondents’ quotations related to this theme can be found in Appendix F.

Pulling It All Together in a Model

Figure 1 presents a synthesized visual representation of how these themes come together to provide a model for the way in which students learn about evaluation through practical experiences.

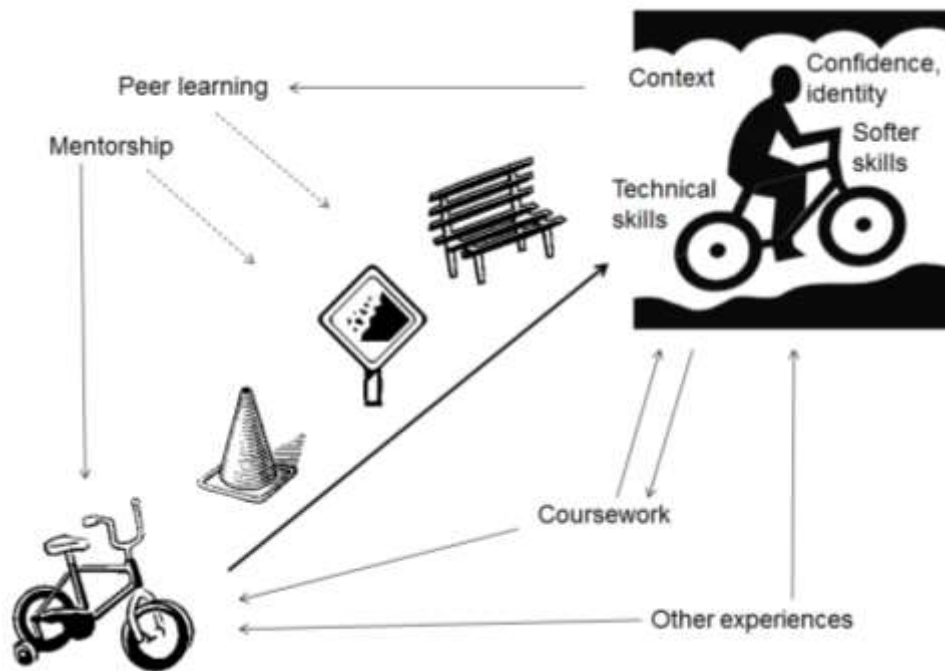


Figure 1. Visual model of how students learn evaluation via practical experiences.

The model starts with a bicycle with training wheels on the lower left hand side. This represents the inexperienced, scared, and excited students starting their first project. They lack the knowledge, skills and confidence of more seasoned evaluators and thus need tools and support (training wheels) to help them through their projects. The upper right hand corner reflects the progression of the students into more developed evaluators. Technical skills are reflected by the wheels and mechanics of the bike – they understand more about how to conduct an evaluation. The student’s hands on the handle bars reflect the softer skills – she knows more about how to make an evaluation run smoothly. The scenery around the student reflects the evaluation context – students understand more about the terrain that evaluation works within. Finally, the student herself, steering a

larger bike without training wheels, reflects someone who is more confident in her skills and has a better sense of who she is as an evaluator and where she wants to go.

As students move through their practical experiences, they report that things such as roadblocks (cone), uncomfortable or scary situations (warning sign), and reflection (bench) can be important learning tools. It is important for students to have support along the way, particularly given their lack of confidence when they first get started. Two main sources of support are mentorship and peer learning.

Mentors can help students as they are getting started by providing them with resources and guidance about how best to move forward. During students' projects, mentors can be especially helpful as a confidence booster – students enjoy having someone to review their work and give it a nod of approval. That being said, too much oversight during a project may deter growth as it can prevent students from encountering obstacles and feeling the confidence boost associated with completing something on their own. For that reason, the line from mentorship to the middle of the model, which demonstrates the practical experience, is dotted. The appropriate balance of mentorship and freedom is not yet fully understood.

Peer learning is another valuable source of support. Whereas mentors may provide tools and guidance up front, a primary function of a partner is as a comforting friend. It is comforting for someone needing confidence to not have to “go it alone.” For this reason, peer learning is further away from the core of the model than mentorship. However, students do report learning from their partners and from other peers, particularly if they take an internship class during their project. As students complete a

project, they develop more knowledge and confidence. This can encourage them to engage with peers even more, which can further prepare them for future evaluations. For this reason, there is a line from the upper right hand corner back to peer learning.

Practical experiences do not occur in a bubble. Most students also take coursework, which both contributes to their knowledge gains completely separately from their MESI experiences and provides a base of knowledge they rely on during their project (hence the lines towards both corners). Additionally, students report that practical experiences help to solidify the knowledge they gain in the classroom, which is why there is an arrow from the experienced evaluator back to coursework. Other experiences, such as evaluation conferences and other evaluation work separate from a practical program, can also be helpful during students' practical experiences and can help them develop as evaluators separate from practical experiences (line to both corners).

Chapter 6

Discussion

Summary of Findings

To date, there has been little research on practical experiences in evaluation despite strong calls for the use of this approach in teaching evaluation students. This study helps to fill that gap through the implementation of a formal qualitative research study of ten students who participated in an evaluation practicum program at one university. Results of the study validate many of the informal faculty observations shared in previous journal articles.

For example, Dewey (2008) found that newly graduated evaluators were lacking skills in writing, research design, evaluation theory, interpersonal skills, and project and team management. Dewey (2008) hypothesized that these gaps might be reflective of a gap between the conceptual knowledge taught in the classroom and the practical realities of working in the field. Practical experiences were called for as a way to close those gaps. This study provides evidence to suggest that practical experience can, in fact, help to fill these discrepancies. For example, writing and research design are two examples of technical skills that students reported honing as part of their experiences. Interpersonal skills and project management were some of the soft skills discussed in interviews. Evaluation theory is the one discrepancy noted by Dewey (2008) that was not discussed much by respondents in this study.

This study found that students also developed a greater understanding of evaluation context as part of their practical experiences. For example, students learned

more about how others perceive and react to evaluation. That finding is supported in two earlier articles: (1) Gredler and Johnson (2001), who found that students were surprised by the effort required to get people on board with an evaluation and by the politics inherent in evaluation, and (2) Chelimsky (1997), who noted that practical experiences can help to orient students to the political nature of the field.

Gredler and Johnson's (2001) findings related to the differences between coursework and practical experiences were also similar to those found in this study. For example, their study found that students felt practical experiences were important because they allow the opportunity to apply knowledge learned in the classroom and they show the "messier" side of evaluation. Therefore, while a limitation of Gredler and Johnson (2001) was that their results were derived from a single focus group of five students, it appears that some similar themes emerged.

Further, many of the themes derived from this study related to the ways in which students report learning are consistent with the model of experiential education outlined in Weeks (1982). In particular, Weeks (1982) discusses how students must be given significant authority over projects, which is consistent with the finding from this study that students feel they would not have experienced as much growth if someone had been providing them with too much guidance.

The second component of the experiential model suggests that students must be able to observe the effects of their actions. This is consistent with the findings from this study that students learned from things that did not go well and gained confidence when they heard that people had used the findings from their studies. Additionally, one student

reported that she did not hear how one of her projects turned out and, as a result, was not sure how she had performed.

The third component discussed by Weeks (1982) is that students must be given opportunities to take what they learned from their specific practical experiences and develop it into broader principles that can be applied across different circumstances. Weeks (1982) suggests that mentors may play a role in this step by providing relevant resources and literature to students. Additionally, sharing among peers is suggested as a way for students to "...identify commonalities and differences, and out of that exercise isolate principles which seem to apply across cases" (p. 23). MESI students who participated in this study acknowledged the benefit of peer learning and said that it helped them brainstorm solutions to problems they were experiencing in their own projects, but also suggested that it gave them a broader sense of the field, which is reflective of this third component of the experiential model. In fact, some students wanted even more opportunities for peer learning, such as informal settings in which they could meet.

The fourth component discussed by Weeks (1982), that students work on projects of varied and significant enough duration that they can apply the principles they have learned to a variety of circumstances, was reflected in this study by the fact that students who worked on multiple projects reported beginning to make comparisons between their projects. This could be an argument for encouraging participants to engage in more than one project, which is an idea further supported by Nadler and Cundiff (2009).

One thing not covered in depth in the experiential model outlined by Weeks (1982) that arose in this study of MESI participants was students' need for support in the

form of comfort and confirmation. Findings suggest that students entered their projects with limited confidence. Support from peers can be helpful to students during their projects, both in the way of partnerships or in-class discussion. With peers, it seems that students enjoy feeling that they are not “going it alone.” That being said, mentors play an important role as well. Students reported that they felt comforted by having their mentor acknowledge they were moving in the right direction. This idea of comfort as a dimension of support in addition to more traditional sources of support, such as the sharing of knowledge and resources is an important area for consideration and attention.

Limitations

This qualitative study stems from the ontological belief that there are multiple realities. The aim of the study was to share the realities of ten MESI participants. The data were gathered under the epistemological assumption that knowledge is known “...through the subjective experiences of people” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). To that end, the sample was intentionally small enough in nature to ensure that the researcher could spend enough time with each respondent to truly understand his or her unique experience. That being said, the study results may not reflect the experiences of MESI participants who had substantially different experiences. For example, the study did not include students who failed to complete their assigned evaluation project or students who had already spent a great deal of time working as an evaluator prior to participating in a MESI project.

Moreover, this study focused on MESI – one specific model for practical experiences in evaluation. Chapter Two included descriptions of four additional models

for practicum programs, all of which varied in significant ways from MESI. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that the findings of this study are specific to MESI participants. Students involved in other practicum programs that are set up differently may experience different types of growth and report learning in different ways. Per Guba and Lincoln's (1989) concept of transferability, which states that, "...transferability is always relative and depends entirely on the degree to which salient conditions overlap or match" (p. 241), researchers should review the program characteristics laid out in Chapter Three to help determine whether the findings from this study may be applicable to another practicum program model.

A potential limitation to this study is that all growth was self-reported by the student respondents. While they are certainly in the best position to talk about how their knowledge and confidence changed, it is possible that mentors and clients may have different perceptions about where students showed the most growth, as well as ideas for where growth was more stagnant.

Another limitation of this study is that practical experiences do not happen within a bubble. Students engage in coursework, conferences, additional work experiences, and networking with other students as a regular part of their graduate work. For that reason, it is not possible to fully isolate the impact of practical experiences on their own. That being said, qualitative studies such as this can give students the flexibility to describe the impact these various experiences had on their overall growth.

Finally, although the study was designed to ensure that students' experiences had occurred fairly recently (started within the last year and a half), even those who had

completed their project within the past few months had some difficulty recalling specifics of their experiences. Things that were particularly difficult for respondents to recall were how they went about accomplishing tasks and making decisions. Students were more easily able to recall key deliverables and takeaways from their projects. While a limited ability to recall information seems to be human nature, it means that some of the nuances of students' learning may not be reflected in this study. That being said, it might likewise be argued that details that do not stand out in students' memories are not likely to have had a major impact on them, suggesting that what students were able to recall are likely to be the most important aspects of their learning.

Implications for Practice

Trevisan (2002) discussed how one practicum program provided many benefits, including professional opportunities for current students, a strong recruiting mechanism for future students, and summer funding opportunities for faculty. This study provides further evidence to suggest that practicum programs can have positive benefits for students and the universities within which they operate. In addition to developing their skills and confidence as evaluators, students in this study reported that their experiences were helpful in terms of networking and future job opportunities. Additionally, some students reported the experience helped them to better network with other students and feel more connected to the program. Therefore, this study provides further evidence to suggest that evaluation programs should consider implementing practicum programs.

This study also illuminated the fact that support is an important component of practicum programs. Support can come from many sources, including mentors and peers.

Mentorship, in particular, appears to require a complicated balance of providing enough guidance and encouragement while still allowing students room to find their own way. Those implementing practicum programs may benefit from paying particularly close attention to the mentoring component and testing out various approaches to determine what works best in various situations. [See the next section for further discussion of potential research in this area.]

Additionally, students in this study really appeared to appreciate peer learning. In particular, students found it comforting to work in partnerships. Moreover, they really enjoyed participating in an internship class during their projects as a way to brainstorm ideas for their own projects, as well as to learn from other students' experiences. Some students requested that MESI organize more informal get-togethers to promote further peer sharing. Fitzpatrick (1994) made a similar point, explaining that, "As graduate students develop group norms about their program and chosen profession, the group effect helps students to assume their role as professionals. Similarly, interaction among students helps to reinforce their interest in and commitment to their chosen field" (p. 45). Those implementing practicum programs may wish to develop more formal mechanisms for peer learning. However, with partnerships in particular, it may be important to consider how work is split amongst the pair as many interviewees reported giving tasks they were less familiar with, or interested in, to their partner. While this seems like a natural way to split up tasks and something that professional evaluators do all the time, one potential downside is that MESI participants may have gotten more out of the experience if they had been forced to do something less familiar or enjoyable.

Finally, some respondents noted the desire for more reflection, either with a mentor or on their own. Students talked about how it would have been nice to have a mentor sit down with them at the end of their project and provide insight into how they did and things they needed to work on. Additionally, some students talked about how they wished they had taken more time to reflect on what they were doing or to document their experiences. Incorporating opportunities for reflection during the experience may help promote further growth for students. One interviewee kept a binder of key activities from her projects, which might be a strategy to suggest to students to encourage them to be intentional and reflective throughout the process. Furthermore, Weeks (1982) provides examples of some activities that programs may implement to encourage reflection throughout the process.

Implications for Research

The literature review in Chapter Two reiterated the point that there are many outstanding questions regarding the specific benefits of practicum programs and how best to structure these programs. While this study provided some data to address those questions, the research questions are too large to be fully answered by a single study. Therefore, potential areas for further research are described below.

First, it would be helpful to repeat this study with other practicum programs to determine the extent to which the findings are specific to the model set up by MESI and whether there are any trends that hold true across different structures of evaluation practicum programs. Correspondingly, this type of comparative research could help to

determine which aspects of the various models for practicum programs are most helpful for students' growth.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, students had some trouble recalling the specifics of their projects, even when the project had been completed within the past few months. This may have had an impact on the ability to get a fully nuanced understanding of students' experiences. To better understand the details of students' experiences, it may be helpful to have students document their experiences in a journal and to conduct periodic interviews versus a single interview at the end of their project. While more resource-intensive, this method may allow the researcher to better document students' evolving thought processes and confidence levels. Moreover, it may allow for the comparison of a students' growth to what was happening at key points during their projects. A potential limitation to this method, of course, is that it may encourage more reflection than students would typically engage in, thereby influencing the results of the study.

Mentors and clients may have unique perspectives on students' performance during practicum programs. These groups were not a focus of the current study, but it may be beneficial to include them as data sources in future research on the topic. It may be helpful to learn whether mentors and clients agree with the knowledge and skill gains reported by students and whether they feel that students' gains in confidence are warranted, given their performance on the project.

Finally, one of the most complicated issues uncovered in this study was how best to address mentorship in practicum experiences. On the one hand, students start off with

limited knowledge and confidence, resulting in a great need for support, while on the other hand, they need room to make their own decisions and falter in order to learn most effectively. Brown and Dinnel (1995) suggest a development approach to supervising evaluation students, but acknowledge it is premature to suggest that the model “is directly applicable in all instances of supervision of evaluation practicum students” (p. 38). More research on Brown’s model could be useful in determining the best approach to supervising students in evaluation practicums. There may also be mentorship models from other fields that may be applicable.

Conclusion

While calls for practical experiences in evaluation are copious, little formal research exists on the topic. This study is one step towards filling that gap. Findings from the study help to confirm many of the informal observations and anecdotes discussed by faculty members in the few journal articles on the topic. Additionally, findings from this study are similar to one of the few, albeit small, formal research studies done on the topic. This suggests there may be themes that are prevalent across different practicum programs being implemented at various universities.

In particular, there appear to be competencies current graduates are lacking that may be well addressed by strong practicum programs. While there remain questions about the best ways to structure practicum programs, this study suggests that support from peers and mentors is key to effective learning, although mentorship in particular requires a careful balance of providing enough support without providing too much guidance.

While this study provides some clues as to important considerations for practicum programs in evaluation, a single study is not enough to fill the large gap in research that currently exists around practicum experiences in evaluation. To this end, the study provides suggestions for further research. These include conducting similar studies on other models of practicum programs, following up with students at interim points throughout their projects, studying the perceptions of mentors and clients, and investigating models for mentorship.

As Weeks (1982) stated, sufficient attention to the training of evaluators is “...important because of the good that well-trained evaluators can do and because of the mischief that poorly trained evaluators can cause” (p. 21). Findings from this study suggest practical experiences can likely play a vital role in the training of evaluators, even if some questions about how best to structure these programs are yet unanswered.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Emails

Email 1. From MESI staff

Hello ADD,

I am writing to let you know that Emily Subialka Nowariak, a master's student in organizational Leadership, Policy and Development is conducting a study with students who have worked on evaluation projects through the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI). The purpose of her research is to understand how students learn about evaluation through practical experiences like MESI. As someone who recently participated in MESI, we have identified you as a possible participant for her study. Please reply to this email by [ADD DATE] to let me know whether or not it is okay to pass along your name, email address and telephone number to Emily so she can provide you with more information about the study.

Your participation in her study is voluntary, but could help to provide information to improve practical experiences like MESI in the future. Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Jean King, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies
Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development
University of Minnesota

Email 1. From Researcher – To those who agree to share information

Dear ADD,

My name is Emily Subialka Nowariak and I am a master's student in Evaluation Studies with the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development. Jean King indicated that you were willing to learn more about my study on the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI). I am writing now to give you more information and ask if you would consider participating.

The purpose of my study is to understand how students learn about evaluation through practical learning experiences like the one you participated in through MESI. I will be gathering data to answer my research question through qualitative interviews which will last about an hour. The only other responsibilities for participants will be to complete a one page questionnaire about their participation in MESI and review of a summary of the interview for accuracy. More information is provided in the attached consent form.

I will follow-up by telephone within the next few days to see if you have any questions and ask whether you are willing to participate. If you would rather contact me, my information is below. Thanks in advance for your consideration.

Best,
Emily Subialka Nowariak
Master's student in OLPD, evaluation studies track
subi0006@umn.edu or 763-227-3009

Phone 1. From Researcher – To occur two days after email above
Dear ADD,

My name is Emily Subialka Nowariak and I am a master's student in Evaluation Studies with the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development. I am calling to follow-up on the email I sent the other day that described a study I am doing on the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI). Did you receive it?

The purpose of my study is to understand how students learn about evaluation through practical learning experiences like the one you participated in through MESI. As a participant you would be asked to complete a brief questionnaire about your participation in MESI, participate in an hour long interview and review a summary of the interview for accuracy. There isn't a direct benefit to you for participating, but your participation could help improve practical learning experience in evaluation, like MESI, in the future.

Do you have any questions about the study?
Would you be willing to participate?

[If yes] Great! Let's go ahead and schedule a time for the interview.

[If no] I understand. Thanks for your consideration. Feel free to contact me if you have any additional questions about the study.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Learning Evaluation through Practical Learning Experiences Pre-interview Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. Prior to our interview, please complete this brief questionnaire which asks about your experiences with MESI as well as your other evaluation-related experiences. The questionnaire also contains a few demographic questions so we can understand the extent to which experiences vary across different groups of students.

Your responses to these questions will only be seen by the P.I. of this study and you are free to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

1. When did you start your first evaluation project with MESI?

____ / ____
M M Y Y Y Y

2. Have you finished your work on that evaluation?

- Yes
- No, it is ongoing (skip to Question 4)

3. How long did you work on that evaluation project?

__ yrs and __ __ mos

4. Have you worked on any additional evaluation projects through MESI?

- Yes
- No (skip to question 7)

5. How many *total* evaluation projects have you worked on through MESI?

__ MESI projects

6. What is the *total* amount of time you have spent working on MESI-sponsored evaluation projects to date?

__ yrs and __ __ mos

7. What evaluation-related coursework, if any, had you taken prior to starting your first project with MESI?

8. Please describe your role and responsibilities on the evaluation(s) you worked on prior to your first project with MESI.

9. What evaluation-related coursework, if any, did you take *while* you were participating in an evaluation project with MESI?

10. Did you work on any evaluations outside of MESI *at the same time* as your MESI evaluation project(s)?

- Yes
- No (skip to question 13)

11. Please describe your role and responsibilities on this/these non-MESI evaluations.

12. What is your current level of study?

- Master's student
- Doctoral student
- Other (please specify: _____)

13. What school are you obtaining your degree from?

- Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development
- Humphrey School of Public Affairs
- Quantitative Methods in Education
- School of Public Health
- Other (please specify: _____)

14. What is your major? _____

15. What is your minor (if any)? _____

16. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

17. What is your birthdate? $\frac{\text{---}}{\text{M M}} / \frac{\text{---}}{\text{D D}} / \frac{\text{---}}{\text{Y Y Y Y}}$

Thank you for your time. Please bring your completed questionnaire to your interview.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Intro: Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview. As a reminder, the purpose of this project is to understand how students learn about evaluation through the evaluation projects they participate in with MESI. You may have done some other activities with MESI, such as the Spring Training, but when I ask about your experiences with MESI in our interview today, I want to focus specifically on the evaluation projects that you participated in through MESI. Does that make sense? Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. So to start out, what motivated you to get involved with MESI?
 - a. What were you hoping to get out of the experience?
 - b. Anything else? (As needed) Any specific knowledge or skills?
2. What were your perceptions about evaluation before you got involved with MESI?
 - a. To what extent, if at all, did you consider yourself as evaluator going into your first MESI experience?
3. [AS NEEDED: I know that you have done more than one MESI project. For now I want you to focus on your first project].
I would like you to think back to when you first started an evaluation project with MESI. What was your first day like?
 - a. How you felt
 - b. What you were expecting
 - c. First thing you did
4. Walk me through some of the major tasks you've completed on MESI projects since then.
 - a. For specific things:
 - i. What was that like?
 - ii. How did you handle / accomplish that?
 - iii. What did you learn from that? How did you learn that?
 - b. To keep the conversation going –Then what? What else?

- c. What were some of the things you struggled with during the evaluation?
 - i. How did you handle that?
 - ii. What did you take away?
 - d. [If more than one project] Now let's talk about your second MESI project.
(Repeat 3a-d)
5. Tell me about an "AHA" moment you had during your MESI experience(s)?
 - a. How did you come to this? What contributed to this?
 - b. Others?
 6. We have already touched on this a little, but I would like to make a list of the things you have learned from your MESI experience(s). I will write them down. So you've talked about [add]. What else?
 - a. [Go through list sans things already discussed in Q3] How did you learn about this?
 - i. What contributed to your learning? (As needed) Something about the context / people / your own studying?
 - ii. Can you give me an example?
 - b. Which of the things on this list are the most important things you learned?
 - i. How come
 - c. Is there anything you will do differently in the future based on what you learned from your MESI project(s)? Tell me about that.
 7. What would have helped you to learn more effectively?
 - a. What could MESI / the project / you / others have done?
 - i. How would that have helped?
 8. Alright, just a few more questions. First, how does learning about evaluation through MESI compare to learning about evaluation through coursework or other experiences you've had?
 - a. How is it similar / different / related?

9. So you said that your perceptions about evaluation before engaging with MESI were [ADD]. How did your perceptions change after you participated in an evaluation through MESI?
 - a. What contributed to this?
 - b. What, if anything, about your MESI evaluation was different than what you expected?
 - c. You said that before MESI you [ADD], where do you see yourself fitting into the evaluation field now?
 - i. How did MESI contribute to this?
10. What else would you like to share about your experience that we haven't talked about yet?

Appendix D: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about how students learn about evaluation through practical learning experiences. You were selected as a possible participant because you recently worked on at least one evaluation project through the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI). We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Emily Subialka Nowariak, Master's student in Organizational Leadership Policy and Development, University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is: To understand how students learn about evaluation through practical learning experiences such as the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to:

- Fill out a brief questionnaire about your involvement with MESI
- Participate in one interview which is expected to last approximately one hour
- Review a summary of the interview and provide corrections or additional comments as you see necessary.

With your permission, the interview would be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription. Only the P.I. of the study would have access to the recording.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

There are no known risks to being in the study.

There are also no direct benefits to participating in the study, though your involvement could help to improve practical evaluation experiences in the future.

Compensation:

There is no compensation associated with this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of

confidentiality. Audio recordings will be used only by the researcher for the purpose of transcription and will be destroyed within nine months of the date of the interview.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers conducting this study are: Emily Subialka Nowariak and Jean King, Ph.D. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at:

Emily Subialka Nowariak
763-227-3009, subi0006@umn.edu

Jean A. King, Ph.D.
430F Wulling Hall, 86 Pleasant Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 554155
612-626-1614, kingx004@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: List of Things Respondents Reported Learning

Below is a list of the main things that respondents reported learning as a result of their practical experiences. The list is broken out into technical skills, softer skills, and evaluation context, which are described further in Chapter 5. This list is pulled from the respondent interview summaries created by the researcher, as respondents did not always list what they learned in a concise and unidentifiable way in their original interviews. Members were provided with their interview summary and given the opportunity to confirm or correct their summarized list of things learned.

Technical Skills

- It is challenging to get people together for interviews and focus groups
- To write questions in a way that you will get to some deeper ideas and constructive feedback versus just positive things.
- Strategies for interviewing youth
- How to be a better facilitator – relaxing and not worry about messing up since most people won't even know, talking slower
- Having a better understanding of the evaluation basics from her introductory course.
- How to create good surveys and run focus groups well
- Looking for tension in evaluation data
- That evaluation questions can take a lot of time to create
- That evaluation questions can be tricky to word. "To what extent" is a common phrase that is used
- How to collect and analyze observational data
- The importance of fitting instruments to your population and purpose
- The importance of making survey questions appropriate to age level when dealing with children. Just generally how challenging it can be working with kids
- That online surveys tend to have low response rates, so some information may be better collected in other ways
- To consider things like what will be most convenient for the participant

- How to structure an evaluation – the process for starting an evaluation, what a good starting point is, what a good ending point is
- It is nice to have someone else do recruitment because recruitment is a lot of work
- One option for recruiting people easily and getting a diverse group is to send a mass email with a survey for those who are interested
- How to analyze items on a survey
- What good survey design consists of
- How to make recommendations
- How to plan an evaluation (talking with stakeholders, create a logic model)
- How to create an evaluation plan. How to do observations. How to code qualitative data (via paper and electronically)
- You need to record if you are going to pull out exact quotes. One option is to transcribe just the parts or quotes you want
- Response rates to online surveys aren't great. It may be better to integrate some data collection into the program, such as collecting at enrollment
- Not every situation is going to be good for observational analysis; You have to target certain things and also be flexible

Softer Skills

- To think about the purpose and audience when starting a task like a literature review
- It is good to present data in visually ways when possible, though technical reports can still be appropriate in certain circumstances
- How to work with people remotely; some strategies include expecting meetings to run longer, leaving more contentious issues for email and listening well so that you can figure out what you need to do without engaging in as much dialogue; also, some of the technical aspects of this, such as using Skype for meeting
- To be flexible throughout the evaluation, making changes to questions and protocols as warranted to gather rich data
- To introduce yourself upfront as the evaluator and to be confident in that

- There are other options besides a formal evaluation report and this may not be the best option when people are busy
- The importance of knowing your audience
- There is never a perfect relationship or a perfect understanding of what you're doing or how to be useful; you just have to muddle through and figure it out as best you can
- Making sure you understand what you are evaluating up front.
- The importance of meeting people; someone can tell you what they want but until you meet with them it is hard to gauge what is going on; face to face is important.
- Stay focused on your original scope in order to finish the project within a reasonable timeframe
- Communication is important; having scheduled meetings is important
- It is good to collaborate with client during the process so they will be invested in the results
- Sometimes you have to balance what the client wants with best practices
- The benefit of coming up with recommendations collaboratively with the client versus on your own
- The importance of getting people to buy into the evaluation (that not everyone is always going to be supportive of the evaluation)
- Time management; be realistic with your time because everything takes longer than you think
- Make sure to have context and know the purpose of the evaluation up front
- Technology can work well in evaluation

Evaluation Context

- The difference between research and evaluation
- Realizing that an organization can really only sustain what they can measure and the importance of creating a culture around evaluation versus having just one or two people who do it

- Some people have less positive reactions to evaluation – Some people have fears about it; some people just want it because it sounds good but they don't know what it entails
- What seems a bit simple and obvious about evaluation isn't always as clear to other people; additionally, sometimes people just don't stop and go back and think through the steps needed to evaluate
- People don't always understand what the evaluator's role is and what the differences are between research and evaluation
- Politics – it is important to understand the political dynamics; be mindful of how high profile your work can be – she wasn't quite ready to be on cable TV and in the newspaper
- Evaluation is a way of thinking about things and there are lots of things besides just data collection tool development that can really provide value; for example, in this case they really just needed help articulating their program theory
- A lot about evaluation consulting
- What it is like evaluating a nonprofit / what their perspectives are (they are supportive, they like evaluation)
- That organizations are dependent on their funding sources and use evaluation findings to get grants

Appendix F: Quotations - Relationship Between Coursework and Practical Experiences

The following are direct quotations respondents provided when asked to discuss how learning about evaluation through MESI compares to learning about evaluation through coursework or other experiences. A few modifications were made to ensure the anonymity of respondents.

Interview 1

“It’s hard to dissect coursework from MESI. I think there’s definitely a bit of a Venn diagram, but when I think about MESI I think about the practical experience of learning about evaluation through my assistantship and through this project this summer with the U. That is invaluable. Coursework, you need it. Principles and Methods class, you need that foundation. Methods, you need Jean’s evaluation problems class, you need the theory class. You need these experiences in the classroom so you can learn the skills, but also learn the theory and concepts behind evaluation. But that isn’t enough. They really have to be married together. The practical, real world experience with the training in the classroom. There’s probably ways of doing both better. I don’t know what those are. I needed both.”

Interview 2

“Putting your thoughts into actions. For one of my courses I had to put together a hypothetical evaluation of what I would maybe do. And I enjoyed doing it; however, it just didn’t feel real. Just doing something for an assignment, so I didn’t really think that deeply about it. It didn’t really reach the level where I thought, ‘Okay, if I’m doing this, is it what I would ask?’ So doing it as an internship and creating it, it made it more real. And yet in a comfortable environment, which was important. Kind of like my student teaching experience. When I was going to school I had created lesson plans for my imaginary students, which is great. However, actually creating a lesson plan for real students, even when that lesson plan fumbled to the ground, it was much more meaningful. And those experiences made me a better educator.”

Interview 3

“I think with evaluation, it’s so much of the context, setting and the people are so much of what makes it, that you can’t create that in a textbook or classroom so easily. So you have to have that “real life.” There are a lot of other things you can learn in the classroom, and you can manipulate the context and the people and understand it, but with evaluation it changes so easily and so often, and there are so many ways to do it, that I think it’s best to learn through real life application.”

Interview 4

“It’s definitely complementary. I felt like my coursework was very practical. I use it now in my job. I use it in my projects. The methods classes were very necessary in learning how to do surveys and focus groups and all that kind of stuff. The MESI projects were valuable in learning the messier side of things. How to communicate with people and how to act like a professional evaluator, more the professionalism kind of things. And the confidence of being an evaluator outside of the classroom, and being paid to do it.”

Interview 5

“Practical experience was certainly valuable. If I had had more coursework prior to doing the evaluations, that might be even better. Maybe it’s just me, thinking that the coursework would make me a better evaluator. I don’t know. I think it’s a balance of coursework and experience.”

Interview 6

“Way better. I don’t think it’s even comparable. I’m a hands-on learner, so that’s probably why I was drawn to MESI. I think you can get a lot of information from a course and didactic learning, but you never really know how that’s going to work until you’ve tried it and implemented it. Especially with evaluation. Things are different everywhere you go. I mean, the organization is different, the people that you’re evaluating are different, what you’re evaluating is different. So you really have no idea or sense of how something is going to look until you create it. At least that’s my opinion. So it was way more valuable than any course I’ve ever taken.”

Interview 7

“It’s kind of hard to say because my MESI work was part of my coursework. I had the evaluation internship going on at the same time. I don’t know that it was really different. I had more time to go in depth and I was doing it myself as opposed to in a team. You know, in [my graduate program] everything’s a team. Which is good but, you know, but it was nice for it to be my show to run as I saw fit. I think the depth of it was more and the independence was kind of a plus minus because there was nobody directing me to the right resources and there wasn’t a syllabus. There wasn’t a clear objective. There wasn’t a clear path of what you were going to learn. You kind of had to make it what it was but I knew that was real life so that was good too. So it’s kind of course work stuff, I didn’t think you could do it without coursework but it was nice to have the practical, in depth experience.”

Interview 8

“This is really good practice. Putting what you’ve learned into practice. I haven’t done focus groups since last fall so I mean it’s been a while but it’s kind of amazing how much you remember once you sit down and start doing everything. Otherwise I don’t know. I don’t think any other coursework other than the focus group class really made this experience easier I guess. In evaluation studies there’s not really a course about, how do you talk with stakeholders.”

Interview 9

“For me it’s like the combined effect like what I learned in class and what I learned in the MESI project, what I learned in class I can apply them to the MESI projects and the vice versa, whatever I learned I can apply. Like this is what a bad survey looks like. So I think either individually would not do the trick because just like knowing the classes, knowing all the theory and not having worked on any projects would not be very helpful. Just doing something practical and not knowing the theory behind it is also not very useful, so yeah – both things.”

Interview 10

“I really think they complement each other really well. I know with MESI it’s sort of like the habit of doing it. And it’s sort of, how it feels to do it. So you kind of learn how it feels,

what it looks like. And all that kind of stuff. Compared to in class it's sort of like, this is what it, this is you know what best practice is and so you can sort of hone your skills in that way. Through that and know what the theory tells you and know what you know other people's experience tells you. But you know with actual internships it's like what, what is it actually like? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it, you know how do you actually do it? Instead of, I don't know just sort of like broader up in the air kind of thing. And I think that the combination of the two is really, really useful because it really made the conversations in classes richer. For myself to be able to be like, "Oh yeah, you know, let me, I'm going to share this experience." What could I have done instead of just being like, I guess having a superficial, "I'm totally going to do this, this and this." And it's like wait a second, that's not always realistic to just like know, or how do you actually do that? So I don't know. Yeah, just being able to connect the two together is really useful."